


Fox (L.W.)

COMPLIMENTS OF
L. WEBSTER FOX, M. D.,
1304 WALNUT STREET
PHILADELPHIA



Valedictory Address to the Graduating Class of
the Medico-Chirurgical College
of Philadelphia.

By L. WEBSTER FOX, M.D.,

Professor of Ophthalmology in the Medico-Chirurgical College.

Delivered at the Academy of Music, May 13, 1896.



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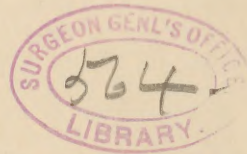


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Professor of Ophthalmology in the Medico-Chirurgical College.

I bring to the members of the Graduating Class the heartiest felicitations of the Board of Trustees and the Faculty. To day you will receive from the president of the college a diploma for which you have worked earnestly and untiringly for three years,—a diploma which binds you to the ending and beginning of your work in life. Guard well this parchment, and let it ever be to you an incentive to higher and nobler deeds.

As your valedictorian, chosen by your faculty to give expression to their feelings and sentiments and also to offer such words of counsel and encouragement which might enable you to feel more securely the new relationship which you bear to life and your chosen vocation, I stand before you in that humble and unenviable position as orator of the day.

Gentlemen, you must be congratulated upon living at a time when great results are obtained, when science is doing more for the preservation of the human race and alleviating the suffering and anguish of the sick-bed than at any period of the world's history; throughout the medical and scientific world everything is being revolutionized at a rate too fearful for us to grasp.

Science has carried the human voice to the confines of a continent, and even opaque substances become as transparent as air. Medicine to day is on the edge of a future almost too wonderful for the most extravagant dreams of a Paracelsus. The last decade has made such revolutions in medicine and surgery that age in the physician is a disqualification. Look at the work of the young experimenters in the laboratories of this and European countries. Note the result of the antitoxins or the serum treatment and its application, as well as the gradual development of preventive medicines.

Do not think your student days have ended; they have only begun. Keep the search-light bright and ever shining; work and wait. This is the age of youth's achievement. It is not

necessary for me to recall to your memories the successful work done by the younger members of the sister professions. Secular history is full of the capabilities of young men. In the language of one of Philadelphia's brightest young attorney's I repeat: "That to hold the world in equilibrium the conservative judgement of age is doubtless necessary, but without the swift intuitions, the radical spirit and courage of youth, the best of history had not been."

Let us look, for a moment, into the history of our own profession. Medicine as it was known to the ancients was surrounded with mysticism. The priest, who seemed to be endowed with more knowledge than the average man of his time, was the healer, and to those afflicted oft-times he applied the vilest remedies. The dawn of our profession dates to the works of Æsculapius, followed later by Hippocrates, and through the labyrinth of time to Galen, who, probably, was the ablest man of his day. So important were his discourses as to the causation of disease and the treatment that for over a thousand years his teachings were followed. It was only, however, when William Harvey, John Hunter, and men of like ability for investigation, analyzing and applying the results of their labors, that medicine received its fullest impetus toward becoming a science. It was, however, left for this century to revolutionize the theory and practice of medicine.

Philadelphia has always led the way in this country as an educational centre. One hundred years ago the only scientific society that was not in Philadelphia was the American Academy of Boston. We had the first philosophical society, the first natural history museum, the first circulating library, and the first medical school. The University of Pennsylvania—that mother of medical colleges!—became a university one year before Harvard rose to the same distinction.

Your college prides herself upon having earnest, faithful, and conscientious teachers,

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zealous in the prosecution of their work. She also congratulates herself in taking a front rank in the great medical centre of the United States.

It is the purpose of the Honorable Board of Trustees and Faculty to maintain the stand it has taken, to advance from year to year, and to convince the profession and the public that the teachings in this institution will be the best in the land. Your class has seen many changes in the growth of the college and hospital. Other developments are under contemplation which will make your school fully equipped to the demands of scientific and practical medicine. The new amphitheatre—the laying of whose cornerstone you witnessed yesterday, one of the largest and best equipped in the country—will be completed within the year. New laboratories and college extensions,—all those additions must make you take a more than filial interest in the progress of your alma mater.

As Marcus Aurelius has said, "Love the art which thou hast learned and be content with it; and pass through the rest of life like one who has intrusted to the gods, with his whole soul, all that he has, making thyself neither the tyrant nor the slave of any man." In your daily intercourse with your brother-practitioners treat them courteously, and preserve your dignity and at all times your personal equation.

In the various walks of life avarice stalks bravely through it all. Unfortunately, our profession is not free from it. Although there be "land-rats and water-rats," it does not necessarily follow that you must be a Shylock. Do not demand the pound of flesh on all occasions. The man who is seeking how best to advance his financial condition through the infirmities or credulities of his patients degenerates into the quack and mountebank. The impoverished have always a claim upon us, and you and your obligations to your profession make it a Christian duty to respond. When, however, a patient can recompense you he should do so bountifully and in ratio to the good accomplished. This will be the most difficult task in your professional career, as you cannot measure professional ability by the yard-stick or pound weight.

There is one subject upon which I must dwell for a few moments. You must pardon me for mentioning such matters, but the carelessness that is innate to the human being at times gets the better of us. Sometimes it might be attributed to eccentricity or genius. A hint on such occasions like this may be most valuable to you throughout your life-time. I refer to personal habits and manners. I once knew a brilliant, brainy student who was most untidy in his personal attire. He was asked why he persisted in appearing so before his classmates, when we all knew he was financially able to do otherwise.

He gave as his answer that it made him look like a genius. That may or may not have been so in the university town of Strassburg, but it is not to be tolerated in our country. Do not be so misguided. Keep your person clean and your clothes tidy,—in other words, be well groomed. The person who is ill has a keen scent and an observing eye. You have been taught that the antiseptic precautions are the "sine qua non" to the successful termination of a surgical operation. Is it not well for the success which you hope to attain to be well dressed and well mannered?

There are such things as sick room manners, which it behooves you to acquire as soon as possible. Do not enter a sick-room in a noisy manner, nor with your hat or overcoat on, hands gloved, and mustache—if you have one—scented with the essence of tobacco. Never annoy your patient by sitting on the edge of the bed, nor by walking to the medicine bottle, taking out the cork, and licking the mouth of the bottle to see if the druggist has compounded your prescription properly. Never censure the nurse in the presence of the patient, if you notice any delinquency in her duties. Do not disappoint your patient in the hour of your next visit; fix the time and try to be punctual. These rules are easily kept and go far toward making you a good beginning in the first years of your practice. But before I leave this subject I wish most emphatically to call your attention to the care of your hands, which should be kept scrupulously clean at all times. I remember once a physician who was called to attend patients in a newly-established hotel in a mountain district. This man, who had age as a qualification, was selected by the proprietor as a man fit for the position, although there was a recent graduate in the neighborhood. Several persons who became ill sent for the old physician. One touch of those hands, one look at those nails, with such evidence of mourning about them, caused the patients to refuse to see him again, and they sent for the young "antiseptic," who, by his cleanly habits and well-attired appearance, not only became the physician to the hotel, but to the district as well. Eventually he outgrew his neighborhood and is now one of the leading and fashionable physicians in a large city.

By the close relationship which you bear to the family in times of dire distress, being at times the unavoidable listener to the ravings of delirium, to exclamations which may be of the gravest import, or when parents will impart to you the inner secrecies of their household, it behooves you, as men of honor, as men upon whom the social fabric of our existence rests, to maintain absolute secrecy upon all occasions. Your work is to alleviate and to hold together our social relationships, not to break down by

selling to the scandal-monger unsavory bits of gossip. A physician who would do this should be ostracized by his brother practitioners and community, and be looked upon as a moral leper.

Pitch your tent on an elevated plane; be exemplary, ambitious, and moral; seek to deserve the confidence which the cloak of your profession throws about you; be the honorable man of your community.

You must now share the responsibilities of life; as your experiences increase the realities will not always be pleasing. The physician has to deal with sorrows, grief, and anguish—sickness, pain, and death. Many of you recall that beautiful, though pathetic, picture by Luke Fylds, called "The Doctor." He has portrayed the every-day life of the physician better than any word-painting of mine. The picture represents the interior of a cottage; a very sick child lies on its primitive cot; near by the mother hiding her face in her hands, shedding tears as if her heart would break; behind her the father, anxiously watching the physician, who is gazing intently upon his dying patient, noting the effect of his last potion, at the same time, in his heart of hearts, realizing that the little one is soon to pass away, and wondering how best to assuage the grief of these two parents bowed down with so much woe. You will be the witness to many such heart-rending scenes.

There is one field which calls for your best abilities, and that is in the field of preventive medicine, which is almost entirely unexplored. Look well toward preserving the good health of your people. It is not the physician who can cure his patients, but the one who prevents his fellow-men from getting ill who becomes the greater benefactor. Difficulties in this work may surround your path, but if the difficulties be not in yourselves you will win. Nature intended man to live one hundred years. It is abuses to which we subject ourselves which makes us fall before our time. It is your duty to guard well the health of the community in which your lot is cast. If the laws of hygiene are followed to the letter, epidemics would not bring desolation to the homes of so many. All

nations are establishing quarantine laws. We have State boards of health to stamp out diseases and thus prevent the spread of a pestilence, but with all this there is more aid needed from the young physician to further these good projects. European cities have long known that a good water-supply means everything toward keeping their inhabitants in good health. London, Paris, Vienna, and Liverpool have their water brought from sources where contamination is impossible. Even in India, where pestilence held its fullest sway, owing to religious fanatics, and where millions have fallen before this juggernaut, the physician has risen above it all and given to Calcutta one of the best-filtered water-supplies of the world. The young physicians of this great city have a noble work before them of establishing a good filtering plant, so that we are not constantly reminded of the fact that to-day, to-morrow, or next week we are about to absorb part of an ancestor. It is to the intelligent physician, aided by the enforcement of sanitary laws based upon the best hygienic principles, that the community is largely indebted for its good or poor health. As our population increases, so must these laws be made more stringent and the knowledge of the physician kept abreast of it.

Let me, in conclusion, exhort you to keep bright the escutcheon of your college, to advance in your profession, to become yourselves the very best, and, to quote the words of my esteemed friend, Mariott Brosius,* "By the example of your fidelity to the State and your devotion to the duties of citizenship set the fashion for the masses who look up for guidance, and inspire them with your heroism in holding up the ideal of the supreme good and demanding submission to its behests, and thus become a pledge to the future of a citizenship whose loyalty to the State, fidelity to duty, obedience to law, love of justice, and devotion to the highest and best aspirations of humanity will hasten that to-morrow of better things in which the fine thought of Victor Hugo will bloom and fruit, and all will be united in the service of the common welfare, which is the 'Supreme Good.'"

